

Message Text

SECRET

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43

ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-01

INR-07 L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 IO-10 AID-05 /081 W
----- 032683

P R 141202Z FEB 75

FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 819

INFO AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

AMEMBASSY RANGOON

AMEMBASSY SAIGON

AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI

AMCONSUL UDORN

S E C R E T BANGKOK 2697

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINR, PINT, TH

SUBJECT: SENI'S VICTORY

REF: A) BANGKOK 2572; B) BANGKOK 2166

SUMMARY:

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SELECTION OF SENI PRAMOT AS PRIME MINISTER WAS A DRAMATIC AND FURTHER ILLUSTRATION OF THE SHIFT FROM THE OLD STYLE OF THAI POLITICS THAT GOT ITS RUDEST JOLT IN OCTOBER 1973. THE CONSERVATIVE FORCES, WHICH RETAIN BOTH CASH AND CLOUT, ARE SMARTING IN THE WINGS. THEY ARE LIKELY TO MAKE PARLIAMENTARY LIFE DIFFICULT, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE, FOR THE DEMOCRATS.

1. THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ENDORSED DEMOCRAT PARTY LEADER SENI PRAMOT AS PRIME MINISTER FEBRUARY 13 (REF A). SENI WAS CLEARLY HEADED ON THIS COURSE WHEN, IN EARLY FEBRUARY,
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THE CONSERVATIVE PARTIES MADE A MIGHTY EFFORT TO REVERT TO

THE TRIED-AND-TRUE THAI POLITICAL DEVICE OF PURCHASING SUPPORTERS. A SECRET BALLOT IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FEBRUARY 6 RESULTED IN THE ELECTION OF A CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADER AS SPEAKER, PRASIT KANCHANAWAT OF THE SOCIAL NATIONALISTS (REF B). SENI SEEMED IN ECLIPSE.

2. GENERAL KRIT SIWARA, THE LEADING MILITARY FIGURE IN THAILAND, HAD BEEN EXERCIZING CONSIDERABLE RESTRAINT SINCE THE OVERTHROW OF THE PREVIOUS REGIME IN MID-OCTOBER 1973. THERE WERE SEVERAL OCCASIONS, SUCH AS THE MAY 1974 CABINET CRISIS OF PRIME MINISTER SANYA THAMMASAK, WHEN HE COULD HAVE INTERVENED TO TAKE POWER UNDER THE CRY OF SAVING THE COUNTRY FROM CHAOS. BEFORE THE JANUARY ELECTIONS, KRIT GAVE FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO SEVERAL CONSERVATIVE PARTIES TO KEEP HIS OPTIONS OPEN. DURING THE ELECTIONS, HE KEPT THE MILITARY LESS PATENTLY INVOLVED IN POLITICS THAN THEY HAD BEEN ON PREVIOUS SUCH OCCASIONS. WHEN THE RESULTS OF THE JANUARY 26 VOTE SHOWED THAT THE DEMOCRATS GAINED MORE SEATS THAN ANY OTHER PARTY, KRIT AT FIRST CONTINUED TO EXEMPLIFY THE RESTRAINT THAT HE HAD SO ADMIRABLY EXERCIZED DURING THE PREVIOUS YEAR AND A THIRD.

3. SOME FACTOR AT THE LAST MINUTE APPARENTLY CONVINCED HIM. HOWEVER, THAT THE DEMOCRATS MIGHT DO DAMAGE TO THE MILITARY BUDGET OR MILITARY PERQUISITES. SENI'S DIFFICULTIES IN FORMING A GOVERNMENT MAY ALSO HAVE CONVINCED KRIT THAT THE CONSERVATIVES HAD A RENEWED CHANCE FOR SUCCESS. HE THEREFORE ENCOURAGED, IF NOT SPONSORED, THAI NATION ASSEMBLYMAN CHATCHAI CHUNHAWAN'S ASSEMBLAGE OF THE "NATIONAL UNION OF PARTIES". THE "UNION" INCLUDED ALL OR PORTIONS OF 18 OF THE 22 PARTIES IN THE ASSEMBLY. THE GLUE WAS SELF-INTEREST AND MONEY. CHATCHAI AND OTHERS ARRANGED THE VOTE ON PRASIT'S BEHALF, AND KRIT COMMENTED TO THE AMBASSADOR THE EVENING OF FEBRUARY 6 THAT HE WAS QUITE HAPPY WITH THE WAY EVENTS HAD GONE.

4. KRIT'S GLEE WAS SHORTLIVED. PRIVATE INTEREST GROUPS, STUDENTS, AND THE VERNACULAR PRESS BEGAN ATTACKING THE MANNER OF PRASIT'S ELECTION. THE CULMINATION WAS AN INTI-SECRET

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MIDATING PROTEST DEMONSTRATION AT AND INSIDE THE ASSEMBLY FEBRUARY 13 THAT ENCOURAGED THE SPEAKER TO ACCEDE TO THE DEMOCRATS' DESIRE FOR AN OPEN BALLOT IN CHOOSING A PRIME MINISTER. MONEY, SECRECY, AND BEHIND-THE-COMMODE DOOR POLITICKING PROVED OF NO AVAIL.

5. COMPARED WITH 1969, THE THAI PRESS IS NOW QUITE FREE-WHEELING, AND THE INFORMED MEMBERS OF THE BANGKOK POPULACE

MUCH MORE VOCAL. THE FORCES OF CHANGE HAVE GONE TOO FAR
TO PERMIT AN ABRUPT TURNING BACK OF THE SCREWS. THE CONSEQUENCE
OF ALL THESE HEADY FEBRUARY EVENTS MUST BE THE REALIZATION ON
THE PART OF THUJHCONSERVATIVES THAT THEY CAN NO LONGER RUN THINGS
BY THE OLD METHODS. INDEED, IF THE ARMY STAYS AT BAY, THEY MAY
NOT HAVE MUCH SAY IN RUNNING THINGS OUTSIDE THE MILITARY SPHERE.
THE DEMOCRATS HAVE THEIZJCHANCE TO TRY A HAND AT MANAGING
THE UNRULY STATE OF THAI AFFAIRS.

6. THE KEY QUESTION IS WHAT KRIT WILL DO. THROUGHOUT HIS
ENTIRE CAREER HE HAS PURSUED A MODERATE AND COMPROMISING
PATH. WE FIND THE ABERRATION OF THE LAST TEN DAYS
SOMEWHAT OUT OF LINE WITH HIS CHARACTER. HIS ACTIONS WILL
EXACERBATE WORKING RELATIONS WITH THE DEMOCRATS. BUT WE
EXPECT THAT HIS INHERENT RATIONALITY WILL PREVAIL, AND
THAT HE WILL GIVE THE DEMOCRATS A CHANCE TO PROVE OR
HANG THEMSELVES.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: COALITION GOVERNMENT, PRIME MINISTER, ELECTION RESULTS, POLITICAL SITUATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 14 FEB 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975BANGKO002697
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750054-0530
From: BANGKOK
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750243/aaaabmoe.tel
Line Count: 133
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: A) BANGKOK 2572; B) BANGKOK 2166
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 16 MAY 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <16 MAY 2003 by ifshinsr>; APPROVED <19 MAY 2003 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SENI'S VICTORY
TAGS: PGOV, PINR, PINT, TH, (SENI PRAMOT), (KRIT SIWARA)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006